The Modern Prophet

Rashīd Riḍā's Construction of Muḥammad as Religious and Social Reformer

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12.1 Religious Responses to the Questions of Modern Society: The Prophets as Social Reformers

“To my knowledge no attempt has been made in earlier times to survey the social content of the prophetic sermons and to demonstrate it in a special presentation. It is only in recent times that interest has been taken in this subject.”¹ Thus wrote the German Catholic theologian Franz Walter in 1900. At the turn to the twentieth century, interest in the social teachings of prophets was indeed paramount. This is not surprising, since discursive traditions are always actualised in view of contemporary demands; and the Islamic discursive tradition is no exception here.

Under this angle, it is fruitful and enlightening to contextualise the subject matter of this chapter, namely, a modernist view of the Prophet Muḥammad, within non-Islamic responses to questions of modernity. This is of course not the sole possibility to contextualise the subject at hand. The very context of the volume that this chapter is privileged to be part of manifests an equally adequate alternative, namely, to contextualise the modernist view of the Prophet dealt with here within other Islamic views of the Prophet. It should be clear that both options are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary, and that it is indeed a matter of focus and emphasis whether one primarily highlights commonalities and differences within one discursive tradition, as this volume does, or whether one foregrounds common conditions underlying different discursive traditions, as this chapter does.

Consequently, I shall begin by recalling the centrality of social questions in modernity, which prompted the systematic search for societal principles also in religious sources. The following section introduces the journal *al-Manār*, the mouthpiece of Islamic modernism, at the very core of whose programme was the construction of Islam as comprising religious and social reform. This went along with constructing the Prophet Muḥammad as the ideal religious and

¹ Walter, *Die Propheten*, viii.

social reformer, as becomes especially clear from an analysis of a major work by the editor of *al-Manār*, Rashīd Riḍā, namely, his tremendously popular book *al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī* from 1933. One reason for this popularity, I suggest, was that the emotionally charged figure of the Prophet and his great appeal within his community helped Riḍā to breach his modernist understanding of Islam to a wider audience. The conclusion will then return to the relation between different discursive traditions and common paradigms and epistemic conditions, elaborating in which sense modernity is primary in Riḍā's modernist view of the Prophet.

Now, a central characteristic of modernity is its demanding answers to the question of how society ought to be organised. Secularist actors grounded their answers to this question in human nature and society alone. Spokespersons of religious traditions shared in many secular premises and views,² but additionally grounded human nature and society in something beyond, in God. Typically, religious teachings for society were posited as superior due to them allegedly providing a firm moral foundation and also due to their alleged universal saliency. From a secular perspective, the social teachings of the prophets are a decidedly modern construction, largely in reaction to a secular position. From the perspective of a believer, in turn, these teachings, whilst of recent interest, had always been there, and it is the secularists who only now arrived at similar insights.

Thus, for example, Georg Stibitz concluded his programmatic article on "The Old Testament Prophets as Social Reformers" published in 1898 by maintaining:

If we now ask what remedy the prophets suggest for social evils, we find the answer to be a *true and living faith in God which works by love toward one's fellow-man....* We have then here writers as early as eight hundred to a thousand years before Christ unanimously demanding as the purifying and plastic power of society the true and unselfish devotion of man to the supreme God, first; and, second, to his fellow-man – a position which has but recently been arrived at by a more or less pronounced evolutionary and scientific method, as the conclusion of Mr. Benjamin Kidd in his *Social Evolution*.³

2 "Secular" in a base sense refers to this-worldly aspects, whereas "secularist" is an explicit, mostly politically relevant position that wants to grant increasing primacy or even exclusivity to this-worldly aspects.

3 Stibitz, "The Old Testament Prophets", 28.

And five years earlier, Charles Kent in his article on “The Social Philosophy of the Royal Prophet Isaiah” had argued that by name alone “social science” is “the contribution of modern thought”, but that the ancient prophets had well addressed the problem of society before, and even in a superior, non-partisan manner.⁴

Rather than positing either a religious or a secularist perspective on society as primary or even superior, I argue that we should view both as articulations and evaluations of a common modern condition. Since this chapter is concerned with the perspective of a religious actor in modernity, it is important to bear in mind that, from an analytical perspective, this religious actor shares in and includes fundamental secular premises, arguments, and also aims.

In order to address the questions of modern society, spokespersons of religious traditions resorted to the foundational sources of their traditions, be it the Bible, the Torah, or the Qurʾān, sharing in what has been called a Protestantisation of religion, alluding to Luther’s credo *sola scriptura*. This trend became so widespread that by 1916 William Bizzell, at the time president of the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas, observed:⁵

We are in the midst of a *renaissance* in the study of the Old Testament scriptures. The evidence of this fact is to be found in the large number of volumes that are now appearing from the press, dealing with many phases of Jewish literature.... The content of the prophetic literature is rich in suggestiveness and social teaching for an age like our own. The realization of this fact makes it desirable to search out and evaluate this social content. This point of view has given a new significance to the work of the Jewish prophet, and stimulated a new interest in his message to the world.⁶

As in this example, interest in the social teachings of the prophets unsurprisingly often went hand in hand with an interest in and a reconstruction of the personae of the prophets themselves, who were said to not only have brought but also implemented these teachings in an exemplary way.

4 Kent, “The Social Philosophy”, 248.

5 Additional examples of the eminent interest in the social teachings of prophets from the second decade of the twentieth century include: Breasted, “The Earliest Social Prophet”; Herrmann, *Die soziale Predigt der Propheten*; Rauschenbusch, *The Social Principles of Jesus*.

6 Bizzell, *The Social Teachings*, [i] (no page numbers given; this is the first page of the preface).

This was also the case in the intellectual trend of Islamic modernism, whose very programme was to appropriate and reconstruct the Islamic discursive tradition to address the questions of modern society.

12.2 *al-Manār* as an Islamic Response to the Questions of Modern Society

The journal *al-Manār*, which was published from Cairo between 1898 and 1940, is widely acclaimed as the mouthpiece of Islamic modernism, that intellectual trend which aimed at formulating modernity from within the Islamic discursive tradition. *Al-Manār* was founded and edited by Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (1865–1935), with the help of his mentor Muḥammad ‘Abduh, the towering figure of modern Islamic thought (1849–1905). The basic aim of *al-Manār* to relate religion and society is succinctly expressed in the most famous subtitle of the journal: “a monthly journal investigating the philosophy of religion and the affairs of society and civilisation” (*majalla shahriyya tabḥath fi falsafat al-dīn wa-shu‘ūn al-ijtimā‘ wa-l-‘umrān*).⁷ The Islamic modernists of *al-Manār* wanted to reform religion from the perspective of societal requirements and at the same time wanted to reform society from a religious perspective. Both the religious and the societal perspective were validated as Islamic; and through the integration of both perspectives in an Islamic discourse, the Islamic modernists transformed Islam into a modern societal religion.

The call for both religious and social reform (*al-iṣlāḥ al-dīnī wa-l-ijtimā‘ī*) is omnipresent in *al-Manār*. The social either refers to worldly, secular affairs in a broad sense or it is further distinguished into the societal, the political, the economic, and the military. As is well known, Rashīd Riḍā increasingly stressed a political dimension of Islam, especially after the First World War. The possibility to construct Islam as a comprehensive programme of reform hinged on distinguishing a true universal Islam (*al-iṣlām al-dīnī*) from its actual inner-worldly manifestations (*al-iṣlām al-dunyawī*).⁸ This distinction fuels Riḍā’s criticism of contemporary Muslim practices, including the veneration of the Prophet, as we shall see below. Riḍā depicted himself as a reformer, a *muṣliḥ*,⁹ who wanted to educate his fellow Muslims to detach themselves

7 On the changing subtitles of *al-Manār*, see Zemmin, *Modernity in Islamic Tradition*, 146ff.

8 For this conceptual pair, see Zemmin, *Modernity in Islamic Tradition*, 168ff., 404.

9 Most extensively, if implicitly so, in his fictional dialogue between “the traditionalist and the reformist”, published first as a series of articles in *al-Manār* and then as a book (Riḍā, *Kitāb muḥāwarāt al-muṣliḥ wa-l-muqallid*).

from contingent worldly practices and, as pious, educated, and critical individuals implement the universal reform programme of true Islam. Under this overarching aim, the Prophet Muḥammad was not primarily to be revered as a person, but rather as the first and exemplary *muṣliḥ*, who implemented the reform programme of Islam in a most perfect manner.

This chapter argues that Riḍā constructed the figure of the Prophet to represent an ideal religious and social reformer. While firmly defending the godly truth of Muḥammad's message and also God's support of his actions, Riḍā stressed Muḥammad's – divinely inspired and religiously grounded – attention to inner-worldly matters. Muḥammad thus also became a role model for Riḍā himself, who proclaimed that the ideal modern society ought to be built on the foundation of the true religion, Islam. Certainly, Riḍā stresses that Muḥammad was a most noble and exceptional person, which was also why God chose him to be His last prophet. However, in principle, every Muslim is able, if properly educated, to implement the reform programme of Islam, and it is in this regard that already-educated reformists, like Riḍā himself, but also the '*ulamā*' and rulers do have a special responsibility.

Part of the Islamic reform programme even has to be elaborated by Muslims today, who cannot merely implement Muḥammad's reforming measures in wholesale detail: Riḍā, like basically all Islamic modernists, distinguishes between clear and timeless religious obligations brought by Muḥammad, which must not be altered, and contingent worldly affairs for which the Qur'ān laid down basic principles. The latter were implemented by Muḥammad in the most perfect manner in his time, but might have to manifest themselves differently in the present. Which aspects are considered to be firm obligations and which are subjected to contemporary elaboration is up for debate, and may shift over time. For example, equating the modern concept of democracy with the Qur'ānic concept of *shūrā* may either lead to validating secular politics or to elaborating an Islamic political system. Riḍā most famously elaborated the political dimension of Islam in his book on the Islamic caliphate.¹⁰ Written in 1922, and thus after he had shifted his focus to the Arab world as the aspired centre of Muslim political power, Riḍā stressed Qurayshī descent as a necessary requirement of the caliph.¹¹ It is important to recall that Riḍā retained the distinction between religion and secular politics in his modernised conception

10 Riḍā, *al-Khilāfa aw al-imāma al-ʿuẓmā*.

11 In this, Riḍā differed not only from non-Arab visions of the caliphate (see e.g. Willis, "Debating the Caliphate"), but also from his earlier support for an Ottoman caliph (e.g. Riḍā, "al-Khilāfa wa-l-khulafā' (1)").

of the caliphate,¹² and that, moreover, the Islamic politics advocated by Riḍā, as well as the role of the Prophet in this regard, have to be viewed in the context of his overall programme of Islamic reform.

To this end, I will now turn to Riḍā's programmatic and highly influential work *al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī* (*The Revelation of Muḥammad*), which was first published in 1933.¹³

12.3 *al-Waḥy al-Muḥammadī*: The Prophet as Religious and Social Reformer

"If Riḍā had written nothing other than *al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī*, this would have sufficed for him meriting eternal fame."¹⁴ Thus wrote Muḥammad Luqmān in his eulogy on Riḍā, who had passed away in 1935. While such appraisals are generally to be taken with caution, Luqmān did and still does have a point: *al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī* indeed was a tremendous success, both immediately after its first publication in 1933 and on the longer run. A second, revised edition was issued in 1934 by the press of *al-Manār*,¹⁵ and a third, again revised edition in 1935.¹⁶ Still more impressive is the number of reviews and appraisals of the book. Riḍā, who on one occasion mentions some calling his book a godly inspiration (*ilhām ilāhī*),¹⁷ showed no false humility in this regard. He published dozens of appraisals or reviews, ranging from a few lines to several pages,¹⁸ and also discussed the book extensively in *al-Manār*.¹⁹ According to

12 This is still often overlooked, even though it has been pointed out repeatedly, for example: Kerr, *Islamic Reform*, esp. 157, 210; Tauber, "Three Approaches, One Idea", esp. 190, 197ff.; Tayob, *Religion in Modern Islamic Discourse*, 111.

13 Riḍā, *al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī*.

14 Luqmān, "Muṣāb al-muslimīn", 232.

15 For the introduction and selected parts of that edition, see Riḍā, "Fātiḥat al-ṭab'a al-thāniya"; for a presentation of that second edition, Riḍā, "Taṣdīr *kitāb al-waḥy al-muḥammadī*: al-ṭab'a al-thāniya".

16 Presented in Riḍā, "*Kitāb al-waḥy al-muḥammadī*: Taṣdīr al-ṭab'a al-thālitha".

17 Riḍā, "Manār al-mujallad al-khāmis wa-l-thalāthīn", 796.

18 A large selection of reviews was collected in the book's third edition (Riḍā, *al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī*: *Thubūt al-nubuwwa*, 15–57). Several of the shorter reviews and appraisals included there, but also additional ones, had previously been published in *al-Manār*, for example: Riḍā, "Taqrīz *kitāb al-waḥy al-muḥammadī*"; Riḍā, "Kalimat fī l-waḥy al-muḥammadī"; Riḍā, "*Kitāb al-waḥy al-muḥammadī* [collection of reviews]". For more extensive reviews, see Nābulusī, "Taqrīz"; Arslān, "Taqrīz"; Harāwī, "*Kitāb al-waḥy al-muḥammadī*".

19 For a critical discussion in conciliatory spirit, to which Riḍā had invited a friend of his, see Bin Yābus, "Taqrīz"; Riḍā, "Intiqād mas'alat al-riqq"; Riḍā, "Kashf baqiyyat al-'ālim

Riḍā, *al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī* was also taught at the Dār al-‘Ulūm, by order of the Egyptian Ministry of Education, and at some schools in Damascus and Beirut.²⁰ Also already in 1935, Riḍā mentions a translation into Urdu and two into Chinese.²¹ What is certain is that a Persian translation appeared in 1939 and a Chinese one in 1946.²² The book was also twice translated into English, once in 1958 (republished in 1960) and once in 1996.²³ Both English translations are of appreciative, non-academic nature. In Arabic, there are at least eight re-editions after the Second World War. I have used the third edition from 1935 as republished in Beirut in 1985.²⁴

The popularity of *al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī* was primarily due to Riḍā showing the salience of the Prophet and of Islam in modernity, as the bulk of reviews testify to. While Riḍā's depiction of the Prophet's personality and life also continues earlier tropes,²⁵ its relevance indeed lies in his construction of Muḥammad as a modern prophet and, as I argue, as the exemplary religious and social reformer.

In the introduction to the book, which was also published as a separate article in *al-Manār*,²⁶ Riḍā addresses both Europeans and those Muslims who have allegedly forgotten true Islam,²⁷ when he states the overarching aim of the book as showing that the Qurʾān contains everything that humans need concerning religious, social, political, economic, and military reform (*min al-iṣlāḥ al-dīnī wa-l-ijtimāʿī wa-l-siyāsī wa-l-mālī wa-l-ḥarbī*).²⁸ Islam thus is, as

al-najdī". For an extensive polemical response of Riḍā to criticism by a Jesuit, see Riḍā, "Tafnīd i'tirāḍ kātib Jizwītī". In an antagonist debate between Riḍā and Farīd Wajdī, *al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī* was also a topic: Riḍā, "al-Maṭbūʿat al-munkira fī l-dīn", 523–28.

20 Riḍā, *Kitāb al-waḥy al-muḥammadī*: Taṣdīr al-ṭabʿa al-thālitha, 34.

21 Riḍā, *Kitāb al-waḥy al-muḥammadī*: Taṣdīr al-ṭabʿa al-thālitha, 33.

22 Riḍā, *Vaḥī-yi Muḥammadī*, and Riḍā, [*al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī*], respectively.

23 Riḍā, *The Revelation to Muhammad*, and Riḍā, *The Muhammadan Revelation*, respectively.

24 Riḍā, *al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī*: *Thubūt al-nubuwwa*.

25 For some additional aspects, see Seferta, "The Prophethood".

26 Riḍā, "Muqaddimat kitāb *al-waḥy al-muḥammadī*".

27 Shakīb Arslān, the famous Arab nationalist residing in Switzerland and Riḍā's friend, even saw Riḍā addressing Europeans only, since Muslims already knew what was presented in this book (Riḍā, *al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī*: *Thubūt al-nubuwwa*, 50). Riḍā objected to this, saying that most Muslims in fact did not know (57); but he still directly addressed the book to Europeans in several instances, not least with the subtitle of the third edition. Riḍā also extensively responded to a Jesuit's critique of *al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī* that had been published in the Beirutian Catholic journal *al-Mashriq* (Riḍā, "Tafnīd i'tirāḍ kātib Jizwītī"). He had also engaged Orientalists' and Christians' views on Islam and the Prophet already earlier, adducing them as strong proof for the supposed truth of Islam, whenever they shared his views; see, for example, Riḍā, "*Kitāb Marjilyūs*"; Riḍā, "al-Qurʾān wa-najāḥ daʿwat al-nabī"; Riḍā, "Shahādāt min ʿulamāʾ al-Gharb"; see also Ryad, *Islamic Reformism*.
28 Riḍā, *al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī*: *Thubūt al-nubuwwa*, 68.

we have said, a comprehensive programme of reform; and belief in the revelation of Muḥammad is the only cure for the deadly spiritual and social poisons (*al-sumūm al-rūḥiyya wa-l-ijtimāʿiyya al-qātila*) that threaten the world today.²⁹ Riḍā lists ten goals of the Qurʾān, which nicely illustrate the supposed causal chain from belief in God via individual morals to social and political order.

The starting point and anchor of Riḍā's comprehensive reform programme is belief in God, in judgement and the hereafter, and in good deeds. Establishing this belief, is, according to Riḍā, the first goal of the Qurʾān. The second goal is to explain the nature and function of prophethood. Here, Riḍā stresses that the prophets were mere human beings, chosen to reveal God's mercy upon humankind and not to be revered themselves. Thirdly, the Qurʾān aims at the perfection of humans as individuals and collectivities; to this end, Muḥammad explained that Islam is "the natural religion (*dīn al-fiṭra*), the religion of reason and thought (*al-ʿaql wa-l-fikr*), of knowledge and wisdom (*al-ʿilm wa-l-ḥikma*), of evidence and proof (*al-burhān wa-l-ḥujja*), of the inner being and conscience (*al-ḍamīr wa-l-wijdān*), and of freedom and independence (*al-ḥurriyya wa-l-istiqlāl*)".³⁰ The fourth goal consists of creating unity on various levels and to thereby effect human, social, political, and national reform (*al-iṣlāḥ al-insānī al-ijtimāʿī al-siyāsī al-waṭanī*). Fifth, the Qurʾān explains what is obligatory and what is forbidden for humans. Most of this conforms to public interest and reason, Riḍā maintains. It is in the sphere of religious practices (*ʿibādāt*) that the Prophet Muḥammad has to be imitated, without any variation. The sixth goal is to explain Islamic government and politics. Goals seven to ten show how Riḍā expands from belief in God to a comprehensive programme of reform: he names as goals of the Qurʾān economic reform, deliverance from the dangers of war, the liberation of women, and the abolishment of slavery.

Looking more closely at the political dimension of the Islamic religion, this is needed, Riḍā argues, because religious, societal, and legal affairs can only be reformed when there is a just, that is, according to him, an Islamic, government. To this end, the Qurʾān established the following basic principles: the people are the source of power, consultation is needed, and the caliph ought to be the ruler. Muḥammad was again the first to implement this reform, which is needed also in this age. Clearly, Riḍā criticises contemporary forms of government, when he claims that

29 Riḍā, *al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī: Thubūt al-nubuwwa*, 92.

30 Riḍā, *al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī: Thubūt al-nubuwwa*, 257.

the rule of the people (*sulṭat al-umma*) as the basic principle (*al-qā'ida al-asāsiyya*) of the Islamic state (*dawlat al-islām*) is the greatest political reform (*a'ẓam iṣlāḥ siyāsī*) brought about by the Qur'ān, in an age when all peoples of the earth were oppressed by governments in their religious and worldly affairs. The first to put this principle into practice was the Prophet of God. In order to serve as an example to those who would come after him, the Prophet never decided a matter of importance to the people without first consulting the people or its representatives. After the Prophet, the rightly guided caliphs did the same.³¹

The Prophet thus is not to be revered as a person, but to be esteemed as having exemplarily implemented the universally valid and rational principles of Islam – this holds true for politics as well as for the other social spheres.

It is under this aim that Riḍā very much stresses that Muḥammad was a mere human being. The argument as such is not novel, but is known from at least two contexts, one being Muslim polemics against alleged contradictions of the Christian doctrine of Jesus being both human and godly, the other being veneration of the marvellous and unrivalled language of the Qur'ān (*ijāz*), going along with stress on Muḥammad allegedly having been illiterate. The emphasis Riḍā places on this aspect is, however, remarkable: *al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī* in fact originated from Riḍā's comment on Q 10:2,³² which reads: "Have the people been amazed that We revealed [the Qur'ān] to a man from among them?" More importantly, Riḍā elaborates the argument that Muḥammad was a mere human being under the modern paradigm of rationality: he seeks to prove this argument rationally and subsequently adduces it as proof of the rationality of Islam. Riḍā explicitly writes against European psychological explanations of Muḥammad's revelation as mere personal inspiration.³³ His own arguments are rational, scientific, and historical, Riḍā maintains. Thus, he asserts that psychologists, sociologists, and historians have proven that no human being can attain new knowledge through their own efforts after the age of thirty-five. Muḥammad was forty years old when he received the first revelations, and he was caught by surprise himself. Riḍā, then, elaborates the classical argument that Muḥammad was a mere human being, as proof for the rationality and saliency of Islamic teachings and principles.

31 Riḍā, *al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī: Thubūt al-nubuwwa*, 289.

32 Riḍā, *al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī: Thubūt al-nubuwwa*, 69.

33 In his critical assessment of Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal's biography of the Prophet, published in 1935 (Haykal, *Ḥayāt Muḥammad*), Riḍā even says to have written *al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī* to counter psychological explanations, and criticises Haykal for referring to such explanations (Riḍā, "*Kitāb ḥayāt Muḥammad*").

In line with this, Riḍā names rationality and independence of mind as major character traits of Muḥammad himself, which, in combination with his elevated morals, qualified him as God's last Prophet. All prophets were free of sin, so they could serve as moral and ethical examples, Riḍā maintains.³⁴ And Muḥammad was the most noble human being – he was, as Orientalists have testified to according to Riḍā, “of sound nature (*salīm al-fiṭra*) and perfect intellect (*kāmil al-ʿaql*), had noble morals (*karīm al-akhlāq*), was truthful (*ṣādiq*), modest (*ʿafīf al-naḥs*), satisfied with little (*qunūʿan bi-l-qalil min al-rizq*), and was not striving for wealth or power (*ghayr ṭamūʿ bi-l-māl wa-lā junūh ilā l-mulk*)”.³⁵ Importantly, when Riḍā adduces the Prophet's character, he does so not in order to venerate the Prophet as such, but rather to underline the supposed principles of Islam, as becomes especially clear from the following sequence: God prepared Muḥammad for his prophethood by “creating him with a perfect nature (*kāmil al-fiṭra*), so that He may send him with the natural religion (*dīn al-fiṭra*), and He created him with a perfectly independent material intellect (*kāmil al-ʿaql al-istiqlālī al-hayūlānī*), so that He may send him with the religion of independent reason and of scientific perception (*dīn al-ʿaql al-mustaḥṣil wa-l-naẓar al-ʿilmī*), and He perfected him with noble morals (*kammalahu bi-maʿālī al-akhlāq*) so that He may send him as the one who completes all noble traits of character (*mutammiman li-makārim al-akhlāq*)”.³⁶

Overall, then, while Riḍā clearly esteemed the personality of the Prophet, this in a sense was merely instrumental for his real concern of showing the truth and applicability of more abstract, universal Islamic principles. In fact, as I shall now argue, while Riḍā had long been critical of popular veneration of the Prophet, he himself resorted to the emotionally charged figure of the Prophet in order to illustrate and mediate his rationalist conception of Islam.

12.4 Emotions and Rationality: The Prophet as Needed Exemplifier of Islamic Principles

In the introduction to the second edition of *al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī*, Riḍā claims to have been saying the same thing for thirty years, namely, that everything that Muslims need for their reform (*iṣlāḥ*) can be derived from the Qurʾān and the practice of the Prophet and his rightly guided successors. However,

34 Riḍā, *al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī: Thubūt al-nubuwwa*, 87ff.

35 Riḍā, *al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī: Thubūt al-nubuwwa*, 116.

36 Riḍā, *al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī: Thubūt al-nubuwwa*, 159.

only few people had reacted to his call before the publication of *al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī*, which was such a tremendous success.³⁷

To verify Riḍā's claim to consistency, one may point to a series of thirty-nine lessons on God, prophethood, religion, and society that he published between 1899 and 1903.³⁸ In the lesson on "Muḥammad, the messenger of God and the seal of the prophets", the view of prophets as reformers is already well formulated: Riḍā considers also Jesus to have been a reformer (*muṣliḥ*), but only a partial one, whence the world required another reformer.³⁹ It was upon Muḥammad to bring a universally valid spiritual-societal reform (*al-iṣlāḥ al-rūḥī al-ijtimā'ī*),⁴⁰ and Riḍā thinks it proven by history that the Muḥammadan reform (*al-iṣlāḥ al-muḥammadī*) is a necessity for all peoples.⁴¹

For this argument, Riḍā refers to Muḥammad 'Abduh's famous *Risālat al-tawḥīd*,⁴² which was a central reference for him also beyond these thirty-nine lessons. In an excerpt from this treatise, published in the first volume of *al-Manār*, the prophets are posited as a rational requirement of society.⁴³ Most fundamentally, in his *Risālat al-tawḥīd*, 'Abduh validated Islam as the one religion that is suitable for modern society because it is fully rational. He does so based on an evolutionist view, arguing that by the time of Muḥammad human capacities had evolved sufficiently for God addressing humans in purely rational terms, sending a message of universal validity. This basic argument was taken up by a quite diverse range of modern Islamic intellectuals. Riḍā, for his part,⁴⁴ would develop 'Abduh's basic defence of the validity and necessity of Islam for modern society into a comprehensive programme of reform, increasingly integrating a political dimension into the alleged essence of Islam. Riḍā also very consistently upheld the alleged rationality of Islam: he even terminologically defined Islam as "the religion of reason (*dīn al-'aql*)",⁴⁵ and argued that the universal principles of Islam mirror reason and human interests to the extent that also non-Muslims may understand and follow them.

37 Riḍā, "Taṣḍīr *kitāb al-waḥy al-muḥammadī*: al-Ṭab'a al-thāniya", 754.

38 I here lack the space to list all thirty-nine articles, but shall at least state the first and the last one: Riḍā, "al-Dars al-awwal"; Riḍā, "al-Dars 39".

39 Riḍā, "al-Dars 36", 334.

40 Riḍā, "al-Dars 36", 335.

41 Riḍā, "al-Dars 36", 329.

42 First published in 1897, the book saw many re-editions; for an English translation, see 'Abduh, *The Theology of Unity*.

43 'Abduh, "Waṣīfat al-rusul".

44 While Riḍā was quite successful in depicting himself as the true heir of 'Abduh, this ought to be viewed critically; see Haddad, "'Abduh et ses lecteurs".

45 Riḍā, "al-Islām dīn al-'aql".

One can hardly overstate the centrality of the Qurʾān in Riḍā's modernist construction of Islam as a comprehensive, rationally intelligible programme of reform. It was the Qurʾān that allegedly embodied the essence of the true, universal Islam (*al-islām al-dīnī*). A central contributor to *al-Manār*, Muḥammad Tawfīq Ṣidqī, even programmatically exclaimed that, "Islam is the Qurʾān alone."⁴⁶ The very fact that this claim to exclusivity was criticised also in *al-Manār*⁴⁷ underlines the novelty of this modern, essentialist understanding of Islam, centred on scripture. To Riḍā, the Qurʾān embodied the primary essence of Islam, whereas the Prophet and his successful, pious successors in a secondary sense helped to understand the Qurʾānic message and showed its veracity and applicability. In other words: the Prophet and his faithful companions and successors showed the success resulting from internalising and applying the Islamic message. According to Riḍā, this could and should happen again today, whence he called Muslims to again take heed of true Islamic principles and to, as pious, active, and responsible individuals, construct a proper and successful society.

Speaking both to the centrality of the Qurʾān and the consistency of Riḍā's argument, it is worth pointing out that *al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī* did not only originate from the commentary on one Qurʾānic verse, as I had mentioned, but was in fact largely based on the *Tafsīr al-manār* and was initially intended as a general summary of it.⁴⁸ The *Tafsīr al-manār* was first serialised in volumes 3 to 34 of Riḍā's journal and then published as a twelve-volume book. Up to Q 4:125, it was based on lessons by ʿAbduh, but should overall be considered the work of Riḍā, who edited ʿAbduh's lessons and completed the commentary until Q 12.⁴⁹ Expressing the programme of Islamic modernism, the *Tafsīr al-manār* aimed at showing the societal relevance of the Qurʾān, along with its rationality. According to Riḍā, the Qurʾān, which he considers itself to be proven rationally and scientifically, is the only miracle that can be taken as proof for the veracity of Muḥammad's message.⁵⁰

This argument goes hand in hand with Riḍā's longstanding criticism of belief in miracles. Riḍā of course would not deny the miracles effected by Muḥammad as stated in the Qurʾān; but he stresses that these were godly signs against those who opposed Muḥammad, and were never meant as proof to his mission. In a similar vein, Riḍā adduces the quick expansion of Islam as

46 Ṣidqī, "al-Islām huwa al-Qurʾān waḥdahū".

47 Bāz, "al-Dīn kull mā jā'a bi-hi al-rusul".

48 Riḍā, "Taṣdīr kitāb al-waḥy al-muḥammadī: al-Ṭab'a al-thāniya", 753.

49 The most extensive study on the *Tafsīr al-manār* is Jomier, *Le Commentaire*.

50 Riḍā, *al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī: Thubūt al-nubuwwa*, 93–118, 221–56.

historical proof for the godly origin of Muḥammad's message. God also helped His Prophet in this regard, granting him victory and sending signs to support his prophethood, but it is the historical facts that stand as alleged scientific proof in this age of reason. Riḍā's rationalist criticism of belief in miracles in general can be seen under his overarching aim of detaching religion from unreflected beliefs and social practices, as Richard van Leeuwen showed.⁵¹

In a similar vein, Riḍā criticised other popular socio-religious practices, not least the *mawālīd*, festivities on occasion of the birth of a prophet or saint.⁵² *Mawālīd* were more widely targeted as irrational and backward in Egypt at the turn to the twentieth century.⁵³ Riḍā very much shared in this trend, devoting a separate section to festivities (*al-mawālīd wa-l-mawāsīm*) in early volumes of *al-Manār*.⁵⁴ Already in 1898, he criticised the *mawālīd* on two lines, again pursuing his aim of reconstructing Islam as a modern, societal religion: comparing *mawālīd* with fairs and exhibitions in Europe, Riḍā bemoaned that the *mawālīd* are uncivilised and lack the benefits of coming together in society.⁵⁵ Complementarily, he criticised certain practices, like standing up on mentioning of the Prophet's birth, as harmful innovations.⁵⁶ A year later, in 1899, Riḍā, who was pleased to remark that some harmful innovations had recently been prohibited, but still criticised many current practices, sketched his own vision of how the stories (*qīṣaṣ*) read aloud on occasion of the Prophet's birthday should look like: "The stories of the birthday of the Prophet that we hear and see all comprise what is not true (*mā lā yaṣāḥḥ*) and they are void of the most important aspect they must contain, namely, praise (*tanwīḥ*) of the great reform (*al-iṣlāḥ al-'aẓīm*) that occurred in the world through the one whose birthday we celebrate (*ṣāḥib al-mawlid*)."⁵⁷

Still dissatisfied with the current state of the *mawlid*, Riḍā in 1917 then wrote his own treatise to commemorate the birth of the Prophet.⁵⁸ This treatise only contains sound *ḥadīths* and narrations, Riḍā maintains. He, however, shifts quickly from the person of Muḥammad to his mission, and foregrounds the

51 van Leeuwen, "Islamic Reformism".

52 A related practice was the visiting of saints' shrines or tombs (van Leeuwen, "Reformist Islam").

53 Schielke, "Hegemonic Encounters".

54 Examples for articles in this section are Riḍā, "Kayfa nantafī' bi-l-mawālīd wa-l-mawāsīm"; Riḍā, "Qism al-mawālīd wa-l-mawāsīm".

55 Riḍā, "al-Mawālīd aw al-ma'ārid".

56 Riḍā, "Munkarāt al-mawālīd".

57 Riḍā, "al-Mawlid al-nabawī", 291.

58 The articles serialised in volume 19 of *al-Manār* were not fully identical with the book published later, as Riḍā mentions in the introduction (Riḍā, "Muqaddima li-dhikrā l-mawlid al-nabawī", 31). For Riḍā's response to a critic of his treatise, see Riḍā, "Radd al-Manār".

societal dimension of Islam. The aspired aim of the treatise is precisely what Riḍā had demanded from such stories above, namely, to remember the great reform (*al-iṣlāḥ al-ʿaẓīm*) that God sent His Prophet with. “The Islamic reform (*al-iṣlāḥ al-iṣlāmī*),” he maintains, “is based on furthering the *iṣlāḥ* of people through the independence of reason and will (*istiqlāl al-ʿaql wa-l-irāda*) and the purification of morals (*tahdhīb al-akhlāq*).”⁵⁹

Marion Katz included Riḍā’s treatise in her broader analysis of *mawlid* commemorations, concluding that: “In content, the text is a modernist biography of the Prophet that eliminates most of the supernatural and miraculous elements of the traditional story to emphasize the ethical and social progressiveness of the Prophet’s mission.”⁶⁰ The new style, content, and aim also showed in other reformist treatises on the *mawlid* in the first decades of the twentieth century: “In their determined focus on the Prophet’s mission, its impact on society, and the imperative for individual believers to emulate his example, such [reformist] texts radically de-emphasized the significance of his birth.”⁶¹ In a sense, Riḍā and other reformists tried to rationalise the *mawlid*, introducing also modern notions of bounded individualism and emotional subjectivity.⁶²

At the same time, the *mawlid* and the figure of the Prophet were successful means to emotionally mediate more abstract principles and teachings to a wider populace. An abridged version of Riḍā’s treatise⁶³ – which, notably, was republished in 2007 – replaced the previous story at the official celebrations in Cairo already in 1916.⁶⁴ In the 1930s Riḍā fulfilled ongoing demands, voiced not least from India where his previous treatise had been very popular, to produce additional texts on occasion of the *mawlid*.⁶⁵ Thus, for the *mawlid* of the year 1932, he composed a treatise on the rights of women, using again the Prophet as ideal example for implementing the principles of Islam.⁶⁶ And while *al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī* was not explicitly written for the *mawlid*, it, too, was presented on that very day, as Riḍā highlighted.⁶⁷

One thus may note a certain ambivalence in Riḍā’s view on the figure of the Prophet: on the one hand, he criticised personal veneration of the Prophet

59 Riḍā, “*Dhikrā l-mawlid al-nabawī* [part 1]”, 415.

60 Katz, *The Birth of the Prophet Muhammad*, 178.

61 Katz, *The Birth of the Prophet Muhammad*, 180.

62 Katz, *The Birth of the Prophet Muhammad*, 209ff.

63 Riḍā, *Mukhtaṣar dhikrā l-mawlid al-nabawī*.

64 Riḍā, “*Muqaddima li-dhikrā l-mawlid*”, 31.

65 Riḍā, “*Dhikrā l-mawlid al-nabawī* [part 2]”.

66 Riḍā, “*Dhikrā l-mawlid al-nabawī* [part 2]”, 131.

67 Riḍā, “*Dhikrā l-mawlid al-nabawī* [part 2]”, 131; Riḍā, “*Taṣdīr kitāb al-waḥy al-muḥammadī*”, 759.

and very much identified Muḥammad with the message he brought, taking him as the exemplary reformist illustrating the success of the comprehensive programme of Islamic reform, which had to be implemented again today. On the other hand, since the Prophet remained that emotionally charged figure able to integrate his community, Riḍā pushed for venerating a specific image of the Prophet, namely, his own construction of Muḥammad as a religious and social reformer. This ambivalence is no contradiction, but rather results from and bespeaks of Riḍā reconstructing the Islamic discursive tradition under the conditions of modernity.

While the intersecting of classical tropes and novel views is constitutive of this process of reconstruction, in the last consequence it occurs under the primacy of modernity, as I shall suggest in my concluding remarks.

12.5 Conclusion: Modern Religions, Modern Prophets

This chapter was concerned with the view of the Prophet Muḥammad by a most prominent and influential spokesperson of the Islamic discursive tradition in modern times, Rashīd Riḍā. While it should be clear that Riḍā does not stand in for the intellectual trend of Islamic modernism as a whole, the interest in social teachings of Islam is one of those aspects widely shared in modernity. Also the Indian, rather pro-British, and secularist modernist Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, for example, added the English subtitle “The Mohammedan Social Reformer” to his journal *Tahzīb ul-akhlāq*. And today, a blogger may proclaim without much explanation that Muḥammad was “the best social reformer”.⁶⁸

Riḍā's own construction of the Prophet as a religious and social reformer was intrinsically related to his construction of Islam as a comprehensive programme of reform. He thereby provided an Islamic answer to the primary and continuous question of modernity, namely, on which basis society ought to be organised. Riḍā argued that this basis could only be religion. For he shared in the categorical distinction between religion and the secular, but denied that the secular could be self-sufficient. Put otherwise, he complemented the modern concept of religion as belief with a modern functionalist understanding of religion as a social necessity. On this basis, Riḍā, as the editor of *al-Manār*, the most prominent Islamic journal (*al-majalla al-islāmiyya*) in the Arabic public sphere, provided Islamic answers to all questions pressing in that public sphere, whether religion, economics, gender relations, or politics. After all, this

68 Farooqi, “Prophet Muhammad”.

is the role of the journalist and the public intellectual that Riḍā was.⁶⁹ That said, Riḍā was not only a journalist, but he equally was a *muṣliḥ*, an Islamic reformist. As a journalist and a *muṣliḥ*, Riḍā wanted to publicly educate his fellow Muslims and citizens to become pious, moral, and rational individuals. Only thus would they be able to internalise and implement the reform programme of Islam, the veracity and success of which had allegedly been shown by the first and ideal Islamic *muṣliḥ*, the Prophet Muḥammad.

The fact that Riḍā was both a journalist and a *muṣliḥ* illustrates the complex intersection of classical and novel aspects, of continuity and change that is constitutive of every major actualisation of a discursive tradition. An eminent asset of Talal Asad's conception of Islam as a discursive tradition⁷⁰ was precisely to bring into view both commonalities and differences, both continuities and changes between the manifold articulations of Islam across time and space. The volume of which this chapter is part of very much testifies to this manifoldness. After all, the Prophet Muḥammad is one central element of the Islamic discursive tradition; and it will be fascinating to see both common and differing elements in the varied views on the Prophet brought together here. Since Riḍā very consciously made sure to articulate his modernist arguments from within the Islamic discursive tradition, it follows that many of the tropes and symbols he used are known from earlier instantiations of that tradition. At the same time, Riḍā with his modernist construction of Islam was not simply updating these earlier forms in a new context. While discursive traditions represent a most plausible and insightful category of analysis, individual articulations of one tradition are often more adequately understood by looking beyond that tradition. This, I argue, is the case with Riḍā's modernist construction of the Prophet, concerning which the primacy of modernity comes to the forefront when viewing it together not with earlier articulations of the Islamic discursive tradition, but rather with contemporaneous articulations of other traditions.

As part of his general argument of Islam being the only tradition suitable for and able to sustain modernity, Riḍā himself would of course maintain that Muḥammad was the only prophet combining social and spiritual reform. Muḥammad combined and thereby surpassed the partial reforms of Moses and Jesus, as Riḍā would sometimes add.⁷¹ However, as we have seen already in the introduction, Riḍā actually participated in broader intellectual trends of modernity that reconstructed religious traditions to address the questions of

69 Hamzah, "Muhammad Rashid Riḍā"; Skovgaard-Petersen, "Portrait of the Intellectual".

70 First formulated in Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, 14–17.

71 For example, Riḍā, "al-Dars 36", 333ff.

modern society. An especially widely shared argument was that religious social teachings were superior to secular ones, because they added a firm moral foundation. Take the following argument of an English Christian theologian from 1917: "The principles which the prophets exalted as the standards of social well-being are as valid now as ever they were. For the social problem is not economic alone. At bottom it is moral and religious. So, after our economists have taught us all they can of the science of distribution and the laws that make for wealth and poverty, we must still turn to seers like the prophets of Israel for spiritual enlightenment and guidance, for the quickening of the sense of humanity and God."⁷²

While basic arguments like this would, then, be elaborated differently in different discursive traditions and across differing sociopolitical contexts, they in a fundamental sense illustrate the primacy of modernity in Riḍā's appropriation of the Islamic tradition. This is to say: while there is a diachronic continuity of symbols and references within one discursive tradition, these symbols and references are appropriated and actualised under epistemic conditions and according to paradigms common across synchronic discursive traditions. On the former level, we observe many commonalities between Riḍā and Islamic thinkers of earlier times. On the latter level, in turn, Islamic modernism shows greater similarities with Christian or even secular modernism than with pre-modern Islamic intellectual debates. Put otherwise: the framing of "modernist Islam" highlights commonalities within one discursive tradition, while the wording of "Islamic modernism" underlines the common conditions shaping different traditions. It is in the latter sense, foregrounded in this chapter, that modernity is primary in Riḍā's appropriation of the Islamic tradition, including his construction of the Prophet Muḥammad.

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⁷² Gordon, "The Prophets", 283.

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